

Monday 31st March 2014

Dear Customer,

I was really looking forward to the promise of sun and heat at the weekend after a cold and miserable week. Well it didn't disappoint, despite being in a thick fog for the whole of Saturday and Sunday, temperatures soared to a whopping 8C. One of the daffodils in my garden even opened.

We have Florence fennel in the bags this week – a new favourite of my guinea pigs. Sniffing it reminds me of living in France and the long glasses of cloudy pastis in 'La Reine Blanche' before dinner! Aged sixteen I was very, very French.

You could try one of these delicious recipes with your fennel:

Roasted Fennel

fennel, halved lengthways, then cut lengthways in 1" pieces
olive oil *balsamic vinegar*

Preheat the oven to 400F. Rub just enough olive oil over the fennel to coat. Sprinkle on some balsamic vinegar, also to coat. Line a baking dish with some foil. Lay out the pieces of fennel and roast for 30-40 minutes, or until the fennel is cooked through and beginning to caramelize.

Fennel and Potato Gratin

3-400g fennel *600g potatoes, peeled*
120ml sour cream *350ml double cream*
100ml milk *knob of butter*
1 garlic clove, cut in half

Quarter each head of fennel lengthways and then cut each quarter into wafer-thin slices. Cut the potatoes into wafer-thin slices, then place them in a sauté pan with the fennel, double cream, sour cream, milk and some salt and pepper. Bring to the boil, then turn the heat to low and let the potatoes and fennel cook gently for about 4 minutes. Preheat the oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. Butter a gratin dish and rub the garlic clove round it. Spoon the potatoes, fennel and cream mixture into the dish, season well and bake for one hour and 20 minutes. The vegetables should be tender, the milk absorbed and the top golden brown. Serve with steamed purple sprouting broccoli or some fresh salad.

Courgette and Fennel Pasta

400g pasta *25g butter or margarine*
50g pine nuts *1 large fennel, thinly sliced*
2 large courgettes, grated *finely grated zest and juice of 1 lemon*
150ml double cream (use passata for a vegan version) *3 tbsp fresh dill, finely chopped*
Parmesan shavings to serve (optional)

Cook the pasta according to the packet instructions and drain. Meanwhile, melt the butter or margarine in a large frying pan and toast the pine nuts for 2 minutes until golden. Add the fennel and cook for 5 minutes until starting to soften. Stir in the courgettes and cook for a further 3-4 minutes until all the vegetables are tender. Add the lemon zest and juice, cream and dill and drained pasta to the pan and stir to combine. Check the seasoning and serve immediately topped with Parmesan shavings if using.

My mobile phone terrifies me. When I first got to know fashion designer Katharine Hamnett it used to call her up to 6 times a day from my handbag or pocket. I was mortified*. It was only after months that I discovered my phone had put her on speed dial on the letter 'Q'. Then it was Abi, head of sustainable fashion at Tesco, I used to ring her at all hours day and night. My phone still rings random people most days. The worst thing is that they often answer the call. I can see afterwards how long it is before they hang up. Some people have listened to me for up to 4 minutes before switching me off. Puffing and panting tramping across the moors, singing to Myfa a made up song in a childish voice in the car. Great! The perils of technology in the pocket of a techno imbecile.

Some years ago I remember being with my friend Richard in Safeways in Camberwell. Pushing the trolley up and down the aisles, he was telling me about a new woman he'd started seeing, meanwhile his longstanding girlfriend was listening to him in his pocket. How we roared with laughter at the check-out when he took his phone out and saw what had happened. Served him right I guess.

I hope you are well and, if you are in the south, enjoying your beautiful weather. Please spare a thought for us cold, wretched, jobless, depressed house-priced northerners

Kind wishes,

Isobel